

GROUNDBREAKERS PODCAST:  
THE STORY OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Sebastian De Beurs

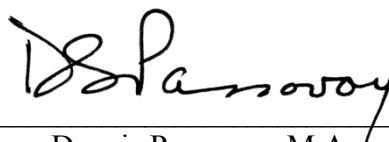
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## ABSTRACT

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Title: GroundBreakers Podcast: The Story of Social Entrepreneurship

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Storytelling is a powerful medium for inspiring change. In both the literature and practice of social entrepreneurship, storytelling is receiving increasing attention for its ability to explain complex issues, activate emotions, and generate action. This creative thesis investigates the stories of 20 of the most outstanding social entrepreneurs around the world through an interview-based approach. The objective was to interview leading social entrepreneurs and publish their stories on a freely available online medium: *GroundBreakers Podcast*. The oral storytelling and original interview approach is used to preserve the authentic voices of the social entrepreneurs. Twenty episodes featuring interviews with leading social entrepreneurs present a window into the stories, business models, and community impact of these groundbreakers. The findings across 20 interviews suggest a high level of innovation in social enterprise design, a deep commitment of social entrepreneurs to their communities, and a strong potential for *GroundBreakers Podcast* to be deployed in educational settings to train aspiring social entrepreneurs. Beyond these findings, *GroundBreakers Podcast* presents a creative thesis that invites all listeners to interpret the episodes for themselves. Through direct storytelling, *GroundBreakers Podcast* hopes that the stories of social entrepreneurship presented not only inspire listeners, but that they motivate listeners to act and help transform their communities for the better.

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## Introduction

When Noobtsaa was in his last year of business school at Georgetown University, he saw his peers siphon off into elite firms. His friend had just received an offer from Goldman Sachs, while another was on her way to work for McKinsey & Company. “Is this what I should be doing too?” Noobtsaa asked himself, not having secured an offer. In fact, he hadn’t even applied for one. Noobtsaa Phillip Vang, the son of Laotian refugees, was busy running a high-growth startup out of his home – or to be more accurate, his kitchen. Shortly after Noobtsaa founded Foodhini, an online food delivery service, orders were streaming in from all over Washington, D.C. But Foodhini was no ordinary startup.

Foodhini employs refugee chefs living in the D.C. area in a community kitchen. The online food delivery service gives these chefs that otherwise would not be able to secure work as a chef a platform to share their food, talent, and culture with the world. The Foodhini platform enables refugee chefs from Laos, Iraq, Syria, the Phillipines, and beyond to cook the authentic recipes from their homelands and craft new dishes for the D.C. community. Foodhini is creating sustainable employment for refugee populations integrating in the U.S. by celebrating their food, culture, and stories. *Foodhini is a social enterprise.*

## **Purpose and Aim of Creative Thesis**

This thesis is a multi-year project about inspiring groundbreakers like Noobtsaa and their stories of social entrepreneurship. It is based on the premise that storytelling is a powerful medium for inspiring change. This creative thesis project's goal was to find the most outstanding groundbreakers and publish their stories in their original voices through a freely available source on the Internet: *GroundBreakers Podcast*.

For this thesis project, *GroundBreakers* was first published on iTunes, SoundCloud, and other media platforms with a single episode in February 2017. The series has since generated 20 episodes and gathered over 5,600 listeners in 14 months. This creative treatise builds on the momentum of that original podcast by reflecting on social enterprise theory and the importance of storytelling and media in the practice of social entrepreneurship. *GroundBreakers Podcast* is presented as a series of 20 episodes and 20 original interviews with leading social entrepreneurs around the world. *GroundBreakers Podcast* episodes are meant to be engaged and interpreted by each individual listener, with the objective to inspire positive change in listeners and the communities they inhabit. This treatise complements the 20 original episodes that make up *GroundBreakers Podcast*, which together form this Plan II Honors Thesis.

## Defining Social Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship and social change have co-existed for millennia. Yet the formal term “social entrepreneurship” did not emerge until the late 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Defining social entrepreneurship, scholars Roger Martin and Sally Osberg argue that social entrepreneurs do not focus on creating substantial financial profit for investors as private enterprise does. Rather, they focus their social enterprise on “large-scale, transformational benefit” to an “underserved, neglected, or highly disadvantaged population.”<sup>2</sup>

The challenges social entrepreneurs focus on are often caused by market and state failure. Market failure occurs when the distribution of goods and services in a free market economy is not efficient or equitable, leading to social inequality and problems in the welfare of individuals and society.<sup>3</sup> In other words, when the economy does not serve the population in full, income inequality, poverty, and other forms of inequity arise. State failure, on the other hand, occurs when the sovereign government of a nation cannot provide for its citizens’ social welfare, due to lack of organization, inadequate resources, conflict, or corruption.<sup>4</sup> Market and state failure cause income inequality, discrimination and social inequality, health inequity, pollution, and other forms of social dispossession.

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<sup>1</sup> Bornstein, David. *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Roger L. Martin & Sally Osberg. “Social Entrepreneurship: The Case for Definition.” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Spring 2007

<sup>3</sup> John O. Ledyard. “Market failure,” *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print

<sup>4</sup> Patrick, Stewart. “‘Failed’ States and Global Security: Empirical Questions and Policy Dilemmas”. *International Studies Review*. Blackwell Publishing, 2007. Print.

## **Social Enterprise Design**

Social enterprises are businesses that social entrepreneurs create to further their social causes.

The business models can be for-profit or non-profit, with a strong emphasis on financial sustainability. An example of a modern social enterprise is Coral Vita. Co-Founders Gator Halpern and Sam Teicher started the social enterprise in order to deploy advanced restoration technology to dying coral reefs. By allowing marine ecosystems and fishing communities to survive, coral reef restoration is an environmental, social and economic cause. When Halpern and Teicher found little grant funding for coral reef restoration, the two decided to launch a social enterprise with investment backing from local governments and the tourist industry. While these investors may have a range of motives, the investment and social enterprise model allowed a financially sustainable organization to pursue its mission to revive the world's dying coral reefs.

The example of Coral Vita engages several core elements of a social enterprise: a cause, a transformational benefit, and a model that is financially sustainable. In the case of Coral Vita, the business model is sustainable in that it generates its own earned income from tourism industries, rather than being grant-dependent. The purpose of a Coral Vita as a social enterprise is not to be profit-maximizing, but to use a for-profit model to maximize its impact, such as preserving coral and the ecosystem and communities that depend on it.



## Complementary Modes of Social Change

While social entrepreneurship offers a promising approach to social problems, it should not be seen as a replacement for social change initiated by government, NGOs, and civil society efforts. Fervent believers in social entrepreneurship have recently suggested that social entrepreneurship is a market-based solution to social need that renders government, non-profit, and other “non-market” social change efforts obsolete.<sup>5</sup> This argument is unfounded. First, because market failure is a phenomenon to which governments with strong social welfare systems can often effectively respond.<sup>6</sup> Second, because state failure is in itself a cause of social inequality, whereas good governance can prevent and help solve such problems.<sup>7</sup> A more reasonable approach is to see social entrepreneurship and traditional modes of change as *complementary* approaches to the challenges of serving social need, not as competitors.

## The Importance of Storytelling

Stories are critical to social entrepreneurs. The power of a story lies in its ability to explain complex phenomenon in a simple, palatable way. Storytelling not only facilitates understanding but allows us to *feel* the truths and myths behind that story.<sup>8</sup> This combination of cognitive and emotional activation makes storytelling a powerful generator of action. When we tell the stories of social impact, it activates a host of emotions: inspiration, motivation, activism, and even

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<sup>5</sup> Sharma, Jyoti. “Avoiding the Neoliberal Trap in Social Entrepreneurship.” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. October 2017

<sup>6</sup> Shorto, Russell. “Going Dutch.” *The New York Times*. April 2009

<sup>7</sup> Patrick, Stewart

<sup>8</sup> Saltmarshe, Ella. “Using Story to Change Systems.” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. February 2018

disgust. Stories allow us to digest the complexity of injustice, activating an emotional response, and encouraging action in the face of injustices.

## **Media Coverage**

In recent years, social entrepreneurship has gained significant media attention. Growing from a novel concept in the 1970s, social entrepreneurship now enjoys widespread coverage on major media outlets, including Forbes Magazine, The Huffington Post, and Fast Company. Media is important to social entrepreneurship for several reasons. Most notably, authentic coverage of a social entrepreneur raises awareness of the cause behind their social enterprise. The enterprise itself, too, can benefit from the awareness that media coverage creates. And finally, the social entrepreneurship field as a whole grows with the awareness created by media coverage.

While written and online media outlets have grown, selecting the right medium for direct storytelling of social entrepreneurship is challenging. The short attention spans of online readers discourage in-depth articles. And the journalistic practice that creates such articles often fails to preserve the original voice of the social entrepreneur being interviewed. Academic papers, on the other hand, often only reach a small and narrowly defined audience.

In order to access the stories of social entrepreneurs directly, the right medium has to preserve the voice of the social entrepreneur. Oral storytelling lends itself to this goal. For this project, I founded *GroundBreakers Podcast* as a public media platform to directly share the story of social entrepreneurs in their own voices. Podcast episodes published online allow listeners to hear the original storyteller and freely access these stories from any device and location worldwide.

## Method: Sample and Procedure

Preparations for *GroundBreakers Podcast* began in October 2017. Twenty social entrepreneurs were recruited through a rigorous selection process, inspired by that of Ashoka.<sup>9</sup> Each GroundBreaker was the Founder and CEO of their social enterprise, with impact at a measurable scale in one or more underserved communities. GroundBreakers were recruited through existing social enterprise networks and conferences. Every GroundBreaker was affiliated with one or more of the following: Echoing Green Fellowship, Ashoka Fellowship, Forbes 30 under 30 social entrepreneurs, Halcyon Fellowship, Impact Hub network, Harvard Business School Social Enterprise Initiative, or the Yale Social Entrepreneurship Conference.

Through outreach across LinkedIn and email, 122 founders and CEOs of social enterprises were contacted. 37 respondents resulted in a 30% response rate. 23 social entrepreneurs were finally interviewed, providing a 68% yield rate, of which 20 interviews resulted in *GroundBreakers Podcast* episodes for this thesis project. Interviews were conducted in Boston, NYC, Washington DC, Austin, and Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Interviews were always in-person and conducted at the headquarters or offices of the social enterprise in 15 out of 20 cases, with exceptions for internationally based social entrepreneurs interviewed at conferences. Interviewing social entrepreneurs within their home office environment and meeting their teams allowed for a deeper understanding of the social enterprise, mission, and team dynamic.

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<sup>9</sup> “Venture: Selecting Our Ashoka Fellows.” *Ashoka*, 8 April 2019, [www.ashoka.org/en-US/program/venture-selecting-our-ashoka-fellows](http://www.ashoka.org/en-US/program/venture-selecting-our-ashoka-fellows).

Audio interviews were processed into episodes with an average length of 20 minutes. The resulting podcasts were published on iTunes, SoundCloud, Stitcher, Podcast Addict, and other medium through media partnerships. A website was set up as an additional platform for publishing the podcasts, in order to make *GroundBreakers Podcast* fully inclusive of and available to listeners globally.

### **A Note on the Limitations of the Method**

After leading social entrepreneurs were identified through Google searches, interview candidates were invited through LinkedIn. This digital approach allowed for a broad and diverse exposure to social entrepreneurs. Yet the sample was limited to those who were found online. Less successful social entrepreneurs, or those without a strong online presence, were more likely to be excluded from the sample.

One mitigating factor was that the vast majority of social entrepreneurs were embedded within social enterprise networks, such as Echoing Green, which place strong social impact rigor on their selection. This pre-screening helped ensure that *GroundBreakers Podcast* represented a sample of social entrepreneurs at the top of their field in terms of measurable social impact – not just a strong online footprint.

Upon selection, responses and response bias depended on the social entrepreneur's willingness to be interviewed. This could be affected by factors such as desire for media attention. Social entrepreneurs with less willingness to be interviewed were less likely to be included in the sample. A mitigating factor was that while the majority of social entrepreneurs contacted had

received media coverage in written articles, the vast majority had never been on a podcast. This allowed for a more uniform desire for podcast interview coverage across the sample, mitigating response bias.

## **Sample Representation**

In order to adequately tell the stories of social entrepreneurs, special attention was paid to the diversity of backgrounds and issues represented. The first interview for this project was conducted in January 2018, with Peerby founder and CEO Daan Weddepohl in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Since then, a total of 20 social entrepreneurs from a variety of genders, ethnicities, nationalities, impact sectors, and geographies were interviewed. Among this group, 60% identify as women, while 40% identify as men (See Figure 1 in Appendix). The social entrepreneurs interview also represent a group diverse in racial and ethnic identity, where 40% identify as persons of color and 60% identify as Caucasian (Figure 2).

*GroundBreakers Podcast* also represent a community of social entrepreneurs diverse in area of impact. Economic empowerment is the most popular sector, with 65% of social entrepreneurs working in this domain. Another 40% of GroundBreakers work on the environment, 40% in education imitatives, and 15% in health. Several GroundBreakers were active in multiple areas of impact (Figure 3). Of the 20 GroundBreakers interview, all were serving a community, while 50% of GroundBreakers originate from the communities they serve (Figure 4). This is an important finding in two ways. First, coming from a community in which social problems abound is a motivating factor for the founding a social enterprise. And second, coming from the community that is being served helps validate the social enterprise as a grass-roots organizations

belonging to the community. Among GroundBreakers, 45% had social impact solely in the U.S., while 60% of GroundBreakers had global impact. Of those globally active, 40% were operating in developing nations (Figure 4). The 20 social entrepreneurs interviewed for *GroundBreakers Podcast* represent a group diverse in gender, ethnicity, nationality, sector of impact, and global footprint.

Part II:

GroundBreakers Podcast Episodes

### **Episode 1**

Noobtsaa Phillip Vang  
Founder and CEO, *Foodhini*  
Washington, D.C.

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/noobtsaa-philip-vang-founder-and-ceo-of-foodhini>

### **Episode 2**

Steph Speirs  
Founder and CEO, *Solstice*  
Boston, Massachusetts

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/steph-speirs-founder-of-solstice>

### **Episode 3**

Sylvana Synha  
Founder and CEO, *Praava Health*  
Dhaka, Bangladesh

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/sylvana-sinha-founder-of-praava-health>

### **Episode 4**

Sara Minkara  
Founder and CEO, *Empowerment Through Integration (ETI)*  
Beirut, Lebanon and Boston, Massachusetts

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/sara-minkara-empowerment-through-integration>



## **Episode 5**

Daan Weddepohl

Founder and CEO, *Peerby*

Amsterdam, the Netherlands

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/peerby-daan-weddepohl>

## **Episode 6**

Michelle Brown

Founder and CEO, *CommonLit*

Washington, D.C.

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/commonlit-michelle-brown-ceo>

## **Episode 7**

Susan Hunt Stevens

Founder and CEO, *WeSpire*

Boston, Massachusetts

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/susan-hunt-stevens-founder-of-wespire>

## **Episode 8**

Harm Van Oudenhoven

Founder of El Castillo Del Cacao

Matagalpa, Nicaragua

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/el-castillo-del-cacao-harm-van-oudenhoven>

## **Episode 9**

Rachel Barnard

Founder and CEO, *Young New Yorkers*

New York, New York

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/rachel-barnard-founder-of-young-new-yorkers>

## **Episode 10**

Michelle Moore

Co-founder and CEO, *GroundSwell*

Washington, D.C.

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/michelle-moore-founder-of-groundswell>

## **Episode 11**

Ron Gonen

Founder and CEO, *Closed Loop Partners*

New York, New York

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/ron-gonen-co-founder-of-closed-loop-partners>

## **Episode 12**

Saloua Lahlou

Founder and CEO, *Crafting Love & Hope*

Rabat, Morocco

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/saloua-lahlou-founder-of-crafting-love-hope>

### **Episode 13**

Anke Van Dam

CEO, *Aids Foundation East West (AFEW)*

Amsterdam, the Netherlands and Moscow, Russia

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/anke-van-dam-executive-director-of-afew-international>

### **Episode 14**

Aerica Banks

Founder, *BEACON*

Washington, D.C.

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/aerica-banks-founder-of-beacon>

### **Episode 15**

Randall Kempner

Executive Director, *Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs (ANDE)*

Washington, D.C.

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/randall-kempner-executive-director-of-ande>

### **Episode 16**

Jason Kang

Co-Founder and CEO, *Kinnos*

New York, New York

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/kevin-katherine-and-jason-founders-of-kinnos>

### **Episode 17**

Jeremy Au

Co-Founder and CEO, *CozyKin*

Boston, Massachusetts

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/jeremy-au-co-founder-of-cozykin>

### **Episode 18**

Sarah Evans

Founder and CEO, *WellAware*

Austin, TX

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/wellaware-sarah-evans>

### **Episode 19**

Sam Teicher

Co-Founder, *CoralVita*

Freeport, the Bahamas

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/sam-teicher-co-founder-of-coralvita>

### **Episode 20**

Meghan McCormick

Founder and CEO, *OZE*

Accra, Ghana

<https://soundcloud.com/groundbreakerspodcast/meghan-mccormick-co-founder-and-ceo-of-oze>

## Findings

*GroundBreakers Podcast* reveals several common characteristics across its 20 stories of social entrepreneurship. The first is the capacity of social entrepreneurs to deploy highly innovative business solutions to community problems. In Episode 2, GroundBreaker Steph Speirs discusses the founding of Solstice, a social enterprise designed to give low-income Americans access to solar energy. Solstice's digital platform connects low-income communities to solar energy "farms" consisting of thousands of panels, allowing those who cannot afford costly rooftop panels to connect to an affordable local solar energy grid. Steph Speirs illustrates the capacity for social entrepreneurs to design unique business models and deploy them as solutions to community problems. This is also the case for Noobtsaa Vang's revolutionary refugee-serving restaurant, Foodhini, in Episode 1. And for Sam Teicher's coral-restoration business, Coral Vita, in Episode 19. In fact, all 20 GrounBreakers present uniquely innovative social enterprise designs on *GroundBreakers Podcast*. No two GroundBreakers follow the same social enterprise design, since every community problem requires a solution tailored to that community. The social entrepreneurs of *GroundBreakers Podcast* provide exactly that: a highly innovative business models designed specifically to solve a problem in their community.

A second major finding is that GroundBreakers hold a personal relationship to the communities they serve. A strong commitment to the community in which the social entrepreneur operates was observed in all 20 social entrepreneurs interviewed. In 50% of the cases, this passion is derived directly from the social entrepreneur's experience growing up in that community (Figure 4). In Episode 2, GroundBreaker Steph Speirs cites her mothers' challenges paying the energy bill as a major reason for founding Solstice. In Episode 3, GroundBreaker Sylvana Synha credits

her family's experiences in the Bangladeshi healthcare system as her inspiration. She founded Praava Health, a social enterprise working to bridge the divide between doctors and patients in Bangladesh – Sylvana's community of origin. For Noobtsaa Vang in Episode 1, it was his experience growing up in a Laotian refugee community that led him to Foodhini. *GroundBreakers Podcast* illustrates that social entrepreneurs not only serve communities, but they often serve the communities they originate from.

And finally, *GroundBreakers Podcast* has inspired listeners around the world with its stories of social entrepreneurship. As of May 2019, *GroundBreakers Podcast* has engaged more than 5,600 listeners across 6 continents. Of these listeners, the top three countries are the U.S., India, and the Netherlands. With 368 listeners alone, Washington, D.C. is the top city for listeners in the world. *GroundBreakers Podcast* has additionally gathered 206 followers on Twitter, engaged 542 people on Facebook, and been shared at the 2018 Harvard Business School Social Enterprise Initiative in Cambridge, MA, and the 2018 Yale Social Entrepreneurship Conference in New Haven, CT. The positive feedback, listener ratings, and comments received across iTunes, SoundCloud, and social media further illustrate the inspiration and appeal of *GroundBreakers Podcast*'s stories of social entrepreneurship. A follow up study that examines more closely the impact *GroundBreakers Podcast* has on listeners' perceptions and behavior would gauge whether *GroundBreakers* inspires listeners to take action in their communities.

The success of *GroundBreakers Podcast* may extend to the classroom, where it can be deployed in social enterprise education. Exposure to *GroundBreakers Podcast* among a group of aspiring social entrepreneurs in the University of Texas at Austin's Social Entrepreneurship Learning Lab (SELL) received strong verbal feedback and is likely to be further embedded in SELL's

educational curriculum in the coming years. The educational application of *GroundBreakers Podcast*'s oral storytelling approach may provide value to students and aspiring social entrepreneurs in the form of both inspiration and practical knowledge of cases in successful social entrepreneurship. A follow up study designed to test learning outcomes among groups of aspiring social entrepreneurs exposed to *GroundBreakers Podcast* would allow us to measure the potential educational value of *GroundBreakers Podcast*.

Across 20 episodes of *GroundBreakers Podcast*, the findings suggest a highly innovative group of social entrepreneurs, connected to and originating from the communities they serve, with high listener engagement across the world. Beyond these findings, this creative thesis invites all listeners of *GroundBreakers Podcast* to interpret the episodes for themselves. Through direct storytelling, *GroundBreakers Podcast* hopes that the stories of social entrepreneurship are not only inspiring to listeners, but that they *inspire listeners to act* and transform their communities for the better.

## Afterword

This creative thesis project would not have been possible without the plethora of support I received from professors, family, and friends along the way. I would like to thank Professors Meeta Kothare and Dennis Passovoy for your generous guidance in this project. Your deep knowledge in social entrepreneurs and thoughtful feedback throughout my thesis allowed this project to develop from an idea to a reality. I would also like thank the Plan II Honors Program, Professor Janet Davis, Professor Richard Reddick, Kaitlin Shirley, Katie O'Donnell, Mary Dillman, and Plan II Honors Director Alexandra Wettlaufer for a rich research experience that has not just benefitted me, but hundreds of Plan II Honors students every year. *GroundBreakers Podcast* could not have been published without the additional support from Rara Reines, Brigit Van Widenfelt, Erik Van Widenfelt, Jason Van Widenfelt, Edwin de Beurs, and Zoe de Beurs. Lastly, I want to thank all 20 GroundBreakers for your generosity and kindness in sharing the work of your social enterprises. Your audacity, leadership, and tireless commitment is transforming communities around the world provides an example for us all. May your stories of social entrepreneurship inspire further change.



## Appendix

Figure 1:  
Gender Identification

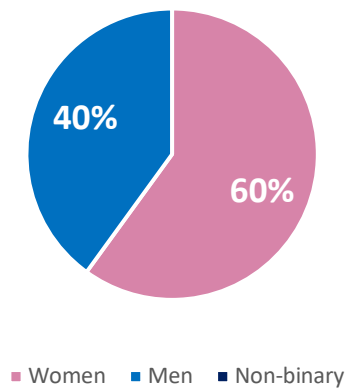


Figure 2:  
Racial and Ethnic Identification

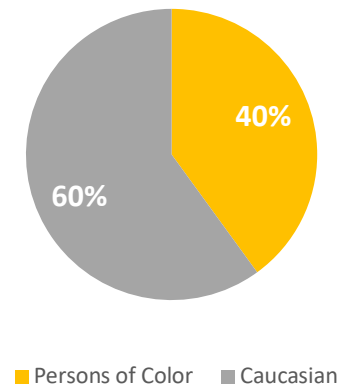


Figure 3:  
Sector of Impact

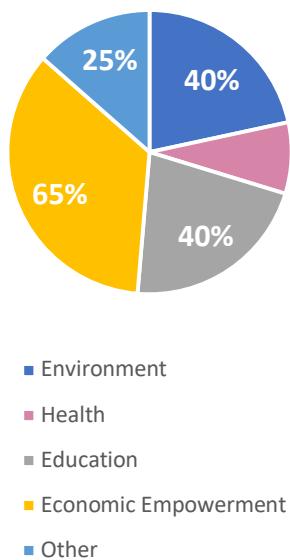
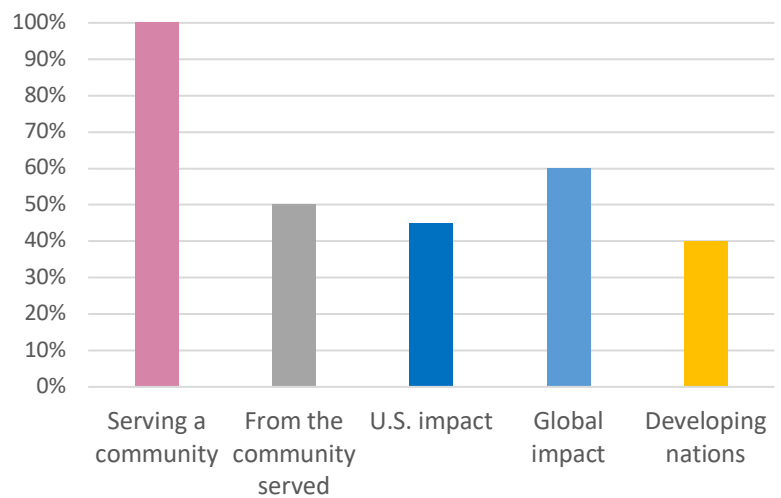


Figure 4:  
Community Impact



Source: GroundBreakers Podcast

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